



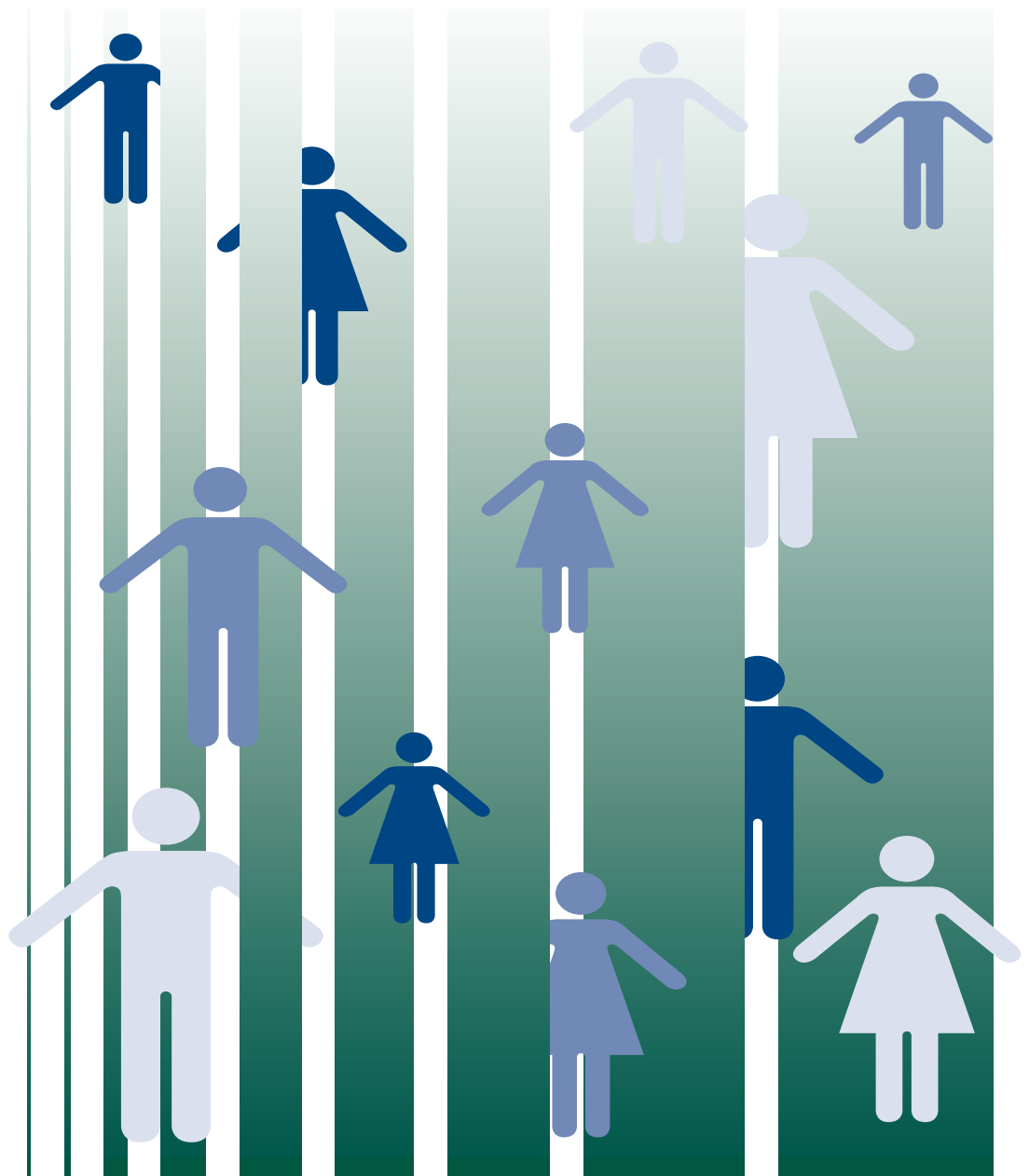
United States
Department of
Agriculture

Civil Rights
Action Team

February 1997

Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture

A Report by the
Civil Rights Action Team

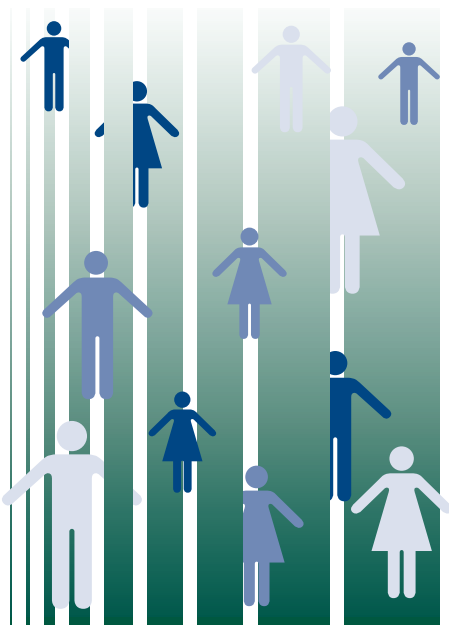




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Secretary of Agriculture
Daniel R. Glickman.

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Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture

Introduction

Secretary of Agriculture Daniel R. Glickman's goal is that each employee and customer of the U.S. Department of Agriculture be treated fairly and equitably, and with dignity and respect. The Secretary's goal is that the USDA become, as Abraham Lincoln suggested over 130 years ago, "the people's department," serving all of the people.

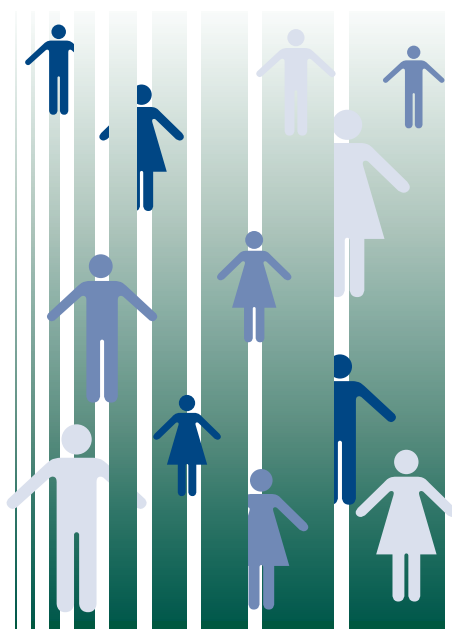
There are some who call USDA "the last plantation." An "old line" department, USDA was one of the last Federal agencies to integrate and perhaps the last to include women and minorities in leadership positions. Considered a stubborn bureaucracy and slow to change, USDA is also perceived as playing a key role in what some see as a conspiracy to force minority and socially disadvantaged farmers off their land through discriminatory loan practices.

Many of the hundreds of minority and socially disadvantaged customers who addressed the civil rights listening sessions held across the country spoke poignantly of discrimination and mistreatment by county-level employees and advisory boards who administer USDA programs. Employees also told of discrimination by USDA managers.

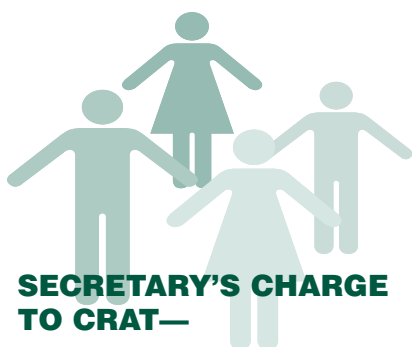
The problems are not new, nor are they unknown. Studies, reports, and task forces have documented the problems in report after report. In 1965, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found discrimination problems both in USDA program delivery and in USDA's treatment of minority employees. A 1970 USDA Employee Focus Group Report concluded the agency was insensitive to issues regarding equal opportunity and civil rights and that cronyism and nepotism were frequent factors in making personnel and management decisions. A 1982 Civil Rights Commission report found the Farmers Home Administration had not placed adequate emphasis on dealing with the crisis facing black farmers, and saw indications the agency "may be involved in the very kind of racial discrimination that it should be seeking to correct." A report by the Congressional Committee on Government Operations in 1990 identified Farmers Home Administration as one of the key causes of the drastic decline in black farm ownership.

Despite the fact that discrimination in program delivery and employment has been documented and discussed, it continues to exist to a large degree unabated. USDA is a huge decentralized bureaucracy that administers several hundred federally assisted and federally conducted programs with more than 90,000 Federal and nearly 20,000 non-Federal employees throughout the world.

Many of its agencies deliver programs through a large field office network in conjunction with local farmer boards which help direct how the programs are administered locally. Maintaining focus on civil rights policy across the far-flung bureaucracy is no easy task.



Members of the Civil Rights Action Team at a listening session.



SECRETARY'S CHARGE TO CRAT—

The Civil Rights Action Team was charged with developing a set of recommendations to address institutional and underlying problems and ways to implement actions to ensure accountability and follow-through at USDA.

On December 12, 1996, a group of black farmers demonstrated outside the White House in Washington, DC, calling on President Bill Clinton to assure fair treatment for them in agricultural lending programs. The farmers also filed suit in court against Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, asking for an end to farm foreclosures and restitution for financial ruin they claimed was brought on by discrimination. The farmers' actions buttressed those by many USDA employees who have relentlessly pursued change by writing letters, holding press conferences, and filing class action law suits.

Clearly, it was time for USDA to address its long-standing civil rights problems.

Secretary Glickman responded by appointing a team of USDA leaders to take a hard look at the issues and make strong recommendations for change. The Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) was charged with developing a set of recommendations to address institutional and underlying problems and ways to implement actions to ensure accountability and follow-through at USDA.

In addition to auditing past reports, the team sponsored 12 listening sessions in January 1997, in 11 locations across the country to hear from customers—especially socially disadvantaged and minority farmers—and from USDA employees. The listening panels were composed of either Secretary Glickman or Deputy Secretary Richard E. Rominger (with one exception), CRAT members, members of Congress, and members of the State Food and Agriculture Council. Customer sessions were tailored to address the civil rights concerns of specific cultural groups.

Testimony at the sessions was often emotionally charged and evoked compassion. Hundreds of customers and employees provided valuable information about how they perceive USDA. Many farmers told stories of years of bias, hostility, greed, ruthlessness, rudeness, and indifference not only by USDA employees, but also by the local county committees that provide access to USDA's Farm Service Agency programs. Minority, socially disadvantaged, and



Some of the most poignant comments, however, came from minority farmers across the country, who noted that the Federal Government writes off millions of dollars in loans to foreign countries that cannot pay, yet forecloses on U.S. farmers when they cannot pay.



women farmers charged that USDA has participated in a conspiracy to acquire land belonging to them and transfer it to wealthy landowners. Minorities, women, and disabled employees charged that discrimination, sexual harassment, favoritism, and reprisals are common at USDA.

Many customers and employees who could not attend the sessions, or who did not want to comment publicly, faxed and mailed comments to the CRAT. Others phoned a Hotline USDA had established to handle civil rights issues. The comments reflected the depth of pain and betrayal felt by so many customers and employees. Many sent page after page of documentation of their situations.

A speaker in Belzoni, MS, said USDA employees treat small-scale and minority farmers “worse than I would treat a dog.” Another, who felt he was receiving unequal and unfair treatment from USDA employees, said “All I ask is for a level playing field.”

A female USDA employee said she was told that her career would be jeopardized if she did not submit to sexual relations with her supervisor. While the supervisor was eventually transferred as a result of an ensuing investigation, she said she was left “stigmatized and blamed for challenging the culture.” Another woman noted that the system at USDA is broken, “perhaps not intended to work.”

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This is the report of Secretary Dan Glickman's Civil Rights Action Team. It is the result of an audit of civil rights issues facing the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1997 in both program delivery and employment. It contains findings and draws conclusions. Most importantly, it contains recommended actions that can be taken to remedy many of the long-standing problems plaguing the Department and weakening its credibility among customers and employees alike.

